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SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: WOMEN ACTIVISTS CALL FOR "ONE
VOICE AND ONE HEART" AND A TEN-SEAT QUOTA IN PARLIAMENT

REF: A. KUWAIT 2393 -- WOMEN'S ELECTION PARTICIPATION

BREAKING TABOOS

- [1](#)B. KUWAIT 2821 -- FREEDOM AGENDA: CABINET APPROVES
FIVE CONSTITUENCY PROPOSAL
- [1](#)C. 05 KUWAIT 2931 -- PDAS CHENEY IN KUWAIT: WOMEN'S
POLITICAL RIGHTS
- [1](#)D. 05 KUWAIT 2674 -- AMBASSADOR CALLS ON FIRST
WOMEN MUNICIPAL COUNCIL MEMBERS
- [1](#)E. 05 KUWAIT 2093 -- "MABROUK:" KUWAITI WOMEN GAIN
POLITICAL RIGHTS YET PONDER THEIR
PARTICIPATION

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: A group of prominent Kuwaiti women political activists, academics, and former candidates for Parliament have launched a public campaign to establish a quota for the number of parliamentary seats to be held by women. They have lobbied the Amir, the Prime Minister, and First Deputy Prime Minister/Interior Minister/Defense Minister during Ramadan calls; held workshops on the issue; and taken the matter to the press. The group applauded the impact women had on the June 29 elections, but lamented that tribal politics and Kuwaiti social customs were barriers to the election of women. They argued if quotas were necessary in Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon, countries they consider to be more open, they were mandatory in Kuwait. At a September 29 gathering, the women activists agreed that any quota should be a temporary measure, but reached no consensus on its proposed implementation: by Amiri decree or through an amendment to the election law. In addition to guaranteed representation in Parliament, the women called for the appointment of more female ministers and greater representation by women at senior levels of government. They were unanimous, however, that no amendments be made to the constitution, fearing such a move would open the door to changes sought by Islamist groups such as making Shari'a the primary source for legislation instead of a main source. Former parliamentary candidate Aisha Al-Reshaid further called on the need for greater unity among Kuwaiti women. Comparing Kuwaiti women to the Bahraini, she said the latter were better able to overcome political and class differences to work for a common cause. Despite the attention given to quotas, public opinion remains divided. A corps of Kuwait's women and democratic activists consider a quota system to be a tool used by developing nations and nascent democracies and fear such a mechanism in Kuwait would lead to calls for a set number of parliamentary seats for the Shi'a, tribal elements, and other groups. End Summary.

A Call for Quotas

[1](#)2. (SBU) Following appeals on establishing a parliamentary quota for women's representation made to the Amir, the Prime Minister, and First Deputy Prime Minister/Interior

Minister/Defense Minister during Ramadan calls, journalist and former candidate for Parliament Aisha Al-Reshaid hosted September 29 a Ramadan Ghabqa (late evening dinner) for women political activists and candidates, lawyers, and academics on the topic. Breaking with tradition, instead of simply offering a meal, Al-Reshaid required attendees to sing for their suppers, offering their views on the quota system and strategies to achieve equal representation in government. Al-Reshaid and Khalida Al-Khidhar, who ran for a seat in both the April 2006 Municipal Council by-elections and the June 2006 parliamentary elections, asserted that Kuwaiti women did well in their first electoral experience, but the outcome made clear that tribal politics and wasta (connections) limited the political advancement of women. They compared Kuwait to Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco, societies they consider more open than Kuwait, and said if quotas were needed there, Kuwaiti women had no chance unless National Assembly seats were set aside. Longtime activist Fatima Al-Hussein, mother of academic and activist Nada Al-Mutawa, said Kuwaiti men were at the top of the mountain and women were still standing in a hole; intervention to get women into Parliament was a must.

A Temporary Fix

13. (SBU) The gathered women, among them parliamentary candidate Dr. Fatima Al-Abdaly, attorney Najla Al-Naki, activist Dr. Suad Al-Trarwah, and appointed Municipal Council member Fatima Al-Sabah, agreed that any quota should be a temporary measure only. Al-Abdaly asserted that a quota had been applied to limit women's admittance to the colleges of engineering and medicine and it was time for a quota system to promote their admittance to Parliament. Regularly citing the CEDAW and pointing to Egypt as an example, Al-Abdaly also

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asserted UN support for quotas on a temporary basis. The activists are convinced that women, once given a chance, will prove their worth and be able to compete equally against men. They were not willing, however, to wait another 42 years and proffered a variety of strategies for ensuring female representation in the National Assembly: a requirement that one of the 10 MPs from each of the five electoral districts be a woman; that 25% of all candidates per district be women; or that when tallying votes, one in three of the winners be a woman. In addition to parliamentary representation, the women said that one female minister was insufficient. They called for the appointment of more women as ministers and undersecretaries. Al-Hussein commented to much applause that a home needs both a husband and a wife to run smoothly and the Kuwaiti nation is just a big house.

But Don't Touch the Constitution

14. (SBU) Despite the call for amendments to the elections law or an Amiri decree to establish a parliamentary quota for representation by women, all were adamant that the constitution should not be amended. Although they said the constitution was not perfect and complained that language referring to electoral districts in the plural prevented the creation of a single electoral constituency, they feared any constitutional amendment would pave the way for Islamists to press for Shari'a as "the source" over current wording that calls Shari'a "a main source for legislation" (ref D).

15. (SBU) Nonetheless, there was no consensus on the best way to achieve the quota. Some called for an Amiri decree, saying such a move would signal Government support for women's full political participation. Other suggested the Amir be able to appoint women to Parliament in the same way two women were appointed to the Municipal Council (ref F). Such a move would guarantee a liberal, female presence in the National Assembly to counter women from Islamist organizations who are better organized and expected to be the

first women elected to Parliament, they argued. (Note: Amiri decrees require ratification by 2/3 of the National Assembly, a fact some of the women did not know. The Kuwaiti constitution requires that MPs be popularly elected, not appointed. End note.) Al-Abdaly and some of the lawyers gathered advocated changes to the elections law, the same vehicle that gave women the right to vote and run for office in 2005 (ref G). They believe that Parliament, when it reconvenes in late October, will consider amendments to the law, including lowering the voting age to 18 and permitting those in the security forces to vote, and want any changes affecting women to be considered at the same time. They do not want women's representation in the National Assembly to be identified as a separate issue. They further called for swift action, speculating that the current National Assembly will not last long and that its dissolution could come as early as March 2007.

All for One and One for All!

16. (SBU) Al-Reshaid welcomed the suggestions and support for a quota, but chided the women for their lack of unity. In addition to Kuwait's political and social culture, she blamed competition among women for the failure of any woman to be elected in June. She commented that she recently traveled to Bahrain to meet with candidates in the upcoming elections and was impressed by their unity as women. She shared with her guests reported Bahraini shock at the discord among Kuwaiti women and challenged them to reach across economic and religious barriers to work for one shared goal, saying Kuwaiti women needed "one voice and one heart." Only by working together could women make the thousands of diwaniya (traditional discussion salons) visits to build political and financial support for a campaign. She also encouraged them to become active in the Women's Network, a recently formed organization to advance the political, social, and economic participation of women. (Note: Al-Abdaly is the Secretary-General of the Women's Network which also includes Dr. Rola Dashti, the top woman vote-getter in the 2006 elections. The Network is a Post MEPI-partner and offered to host the Gulf branch of the Arab Women's Legal Network. End note.)

17. (SBU) Despite increased discussion of a quota system, the measure does not yet enjoy broad popular support. Many of those now in favor of a quota previously opposed it. Additionally, many Kuwaiti men and women consider quotas to be "undemocratic" and a tool used only by developing nations. Members of the Women's Cultural and Social Society, which

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waged a successful voter information campaign during the elections, consider a quota system discrimination against men and called for MPs to be selected based on their qualifications and not their genders. Still others worry that implementation of a quota system for women would lead to a call for quotas for Shi'a politicians, tribal candidates, and other groupings, resulting in the eventual erosion of the legislative body.

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LeBaron